DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 466 IR 011 090

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TITLE Children and Television...A Primer for Parents [Revised].
INSTITUTION Boys Town, Neb.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Children; Guidelines; *Parent Influence; *Programing (Broadcast); Stereotypes; *Television Commercials; Television Research; *Television Viewing; Time Management; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Reality

ABSTRACT

This booklet highlights the results of research findings on the impact of television on children and provides advice for parents on why and how they can exercise some moderating influence on television's impact. The issues covered include the effect of the amount of time children spend watching television, the impact on children of televised violence, the reality of life as it is portrayed on television and the effect of televised role stereotypes, and the impact on children of television commercials and advertising. It is suggested that parents manage at least somewhat the quantity and quality of television viewed by their children, that they occasionally watch along with the children and interpret television's antisocial and prosocial portrayals through comment and discussion, and that they express their likes and dislikes to television producers and broadcasters, either directly or through advocacy groups. Also provided are a list of 11 publications containing further information and listings of the names and addresses of television networks, regulatory government agencies, the broadcasting industry's trade organization, and educational organizations and consumer groups concened with television programming or advertising. (ESR)

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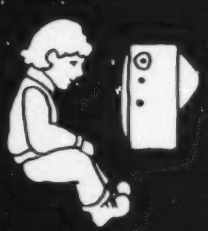

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a primer for parents

Children and television . . . . . a primer for parents

By John P. Murray and Barbara Lonnborg

BOYS TOWN

"He ain't home, Father ... he's at Boys Town"

oreword:

Can we improve children's television?

We certainly can improve children's television if parents, consumer action groups, and the television industry work to establish a commitment to quality programming. Our experiences with *Sesame Street*, the *Electric Company*, and *3-2-1 Contact*, and the experiences of others who produce careful and thoughtful programs for young viewers, show that it is possible to provide entertaining and informative programs that are tailored to the needs of children. In my view, children need, and parents deserve, to have quality programming provided by our broadcasting institutions. Parents can't control program content, but they can influence the policies of those who do.

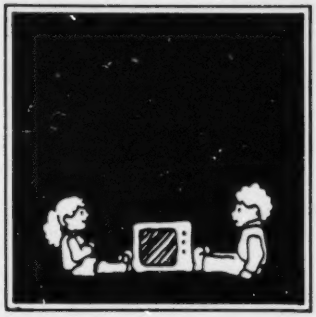
The definition of good programming is not as mysterious as some would have us believe. Most parents have fairly clear feelings about what constitutes good or bad behavior, reasonable or unreasonable actions. When they first watch a new television program, they can evaluate it by asking themselves: "If this were a lesson, is it one that I would want my children to learn?" But we can also ask more of children's programs than that they merely avoid the harmful. We can ask that children's programs aspire to higher goals: to enlighten, to spark or feed curiosity, imagination, and inspiration. We can ask that at least some programs attempt to encourage children's reasoning skills; their ability to evaluate their personal, social and emotional situations; and above all, help children utilize their own resources and find pleasure in developing to their full potential. These changes in children's television are all possible, some have already begun, but they will only continue and grow if parents nurture the changes by making their feelings known. Boys Town's publication of this booklet on children and television is an important step in helping parents become involved in this process.

Parents will appreciate the information and advice contained in this booklet. Dr. John Murray is one of the nation's and the world's foremost authorities on the positive and negative roles that television plays in young children's development. In this booklet, he and his colleague, Barbara Lonnborg, present the research and issues in a clear, brief form coupled with some down-to-earth advice on why and how parents can exercise some moderating influence. The authors avoid the frequent pitfall of less scholarly parental advisers who too often only make parents feel guilty or inadequate.

This booklet is a highly successful attempt to distill the extensive research and to bring into clear focus precisely those issues about which parents are concerned and those effects over which they really can exercise some influence. Most importantly, the suggested steps parents can take are within reasonable bounds of time and energy even in homes where there are competing outside demands. These steps are, in simple summary, to manage at least somewhat the quantity and quality of television viewed by the children, to occasionally watch along with the children and interpret television's antisocial and prosocial portrayals through comment and discussion, and to express one's likes and dislikes to the producers and broadcasters, either directly or through advocacy groups.

I congratulate the Boys Town Center for making available this informative and practical guide.

Edward L. Palmer, Ph.D.
Vice President
Children's Television Workshop



ntroduction:
What are the issues?

You may have wondered about the effects of television on the first day your child peered with fascination at the pictures and people dancing around inside the box in the living room. TV has a wonderful capacity to inform and entertain your child. But perhaps you wonder about its potential for other influences on your family because of violent programming, advertising aimed at children, or its portrayals of minorities, women, and the elderly. In fact, there now have been more than 25 years of investigation into many of the concerns you may have.

This booklet highlights some of the most persuasive research on the role that television plays in children's lives. If you have already decided that you want to control how TV influences your family, this material may support and reinforce your decisions. However, if you've heard more arguments than facts about the issues, this information may help you to decide what you want to do.

As an informed parent, there are two basic things you can do — *monitor* the television your children watch and *mediate* some of the effects that TV may have on the youngsters in your family. There are, of course, many ways of accomplishing these objectives. This booklet concludes with a variety of suggestions, gathered from a number of sources, so you can choose those that best suit your family.

elevision Time:
How much is too much?

Television viewing hours typically increase through childhood, peak in the early teen years, and then fall off as teenagers become more involved with friends and social activities outside the home. Audience surveys have found that two- to five-year-olds watch an average of 31 hours each week — that's more than four hours each day. Children who watch that much television seem to be affected in a number of areas — school performance, reading ability, and play activities.

In a study by Dr. Sharon Gadberry of Adelphi University, 6- to 11-year-olds who were heavy TV viewers put in much less effort on schoolwork than light viewers did. When Gadberry asked some parents to cut their first graders' viewing time in half, the children spent more time reading, became more reflective, and improved on some measures of intelligence compared to another group of first graders who did not change their normal viewing habits.

Similarly, a California State Department of Education study found that sixth graders who watched less than one hour of TV each day scored 7% higher on

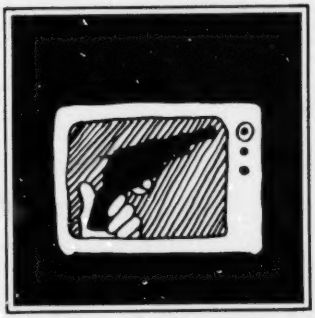
academic achievement tests than their classmates who watched four or more hours each day.

Dr. Tannis Williams believes that television reduces the time spent on reading by young children and that this can prevent them from learning the skills needed to be good readers. Her research team at the University of British Columbia studied children in three towns in Canada: one without television, another with only Canadian government TV, and a third with both Canadian and American commercial television. Children in the town without TV had better reading skills and were more verbally fluent than children living with TV. However, when television was introduced to the first town, the children's skills declined.

Other studies demonstrate that television competes with radio, books, movies, and comics for a child's attention. It may also reduce children's time with friends and hobbies. In an Australian town, the introduction of television acted like a magnet drawing children more often to the home and away from play activities outside. Drs. Dorothy and Jerome Singer of Yale University discovered that heavy viewing children among a group of third to fifth graders played less well with their friends, had fewer hobbies, and were less involved in music, religious, and athletic activities.

Yet, other research shows that when children are given choices, they often pick things to do other than watching television. In surveys that asked children to rank their favorite activities, television appeared far down the list. Nicholas Van Dyck, director of the National Council for Children and Television, points out, "If kids have their television watching limited in the early years, they develop other skills like riding bicycles or playing games that they find to be more rewarding."

There may be many reasons why one child watches more TV than another youngster — the availability of playmates, the family's ability to provide other activities and entertainment, the child's interests and skills, and perhaps most influential, the parents' viewing habits. "The parent is a very strong model for the child," says Dorothy Singer. "If their parents are heavy watchers, the children tend to be heavy watchers also."



iolence on Television:

Do children learn from it?

According to University of Pennsylvania studies, an average of five violent acts occur during an hour of prime-time TV and 18 during an hour of children's programming. Such statistics explain why hundreds of research studies have examined television violence and its effects.

In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health released a ten-year follow-up report to the U.S. Surgeon General's study of televised violence and children. This new government report, confirming and extending earlier findings, concluded that "violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs." That conclusion, however, continues to be debated bitterly by broadcasters and scientists.

Part of the reason for the continuing argument, say Dr. Eli Rubinstein and Dr. Alberta Siegel, members of the Surgeon General's panel, is that it is difficult to find *one* crucial study that conclusively proves the case for or against the link between TV violence and aggression. Rather it is the *accumulated* evidence from hundreds of research projects that indicates this relationship exists.

Several of the pioneering researchers in this area, including Dr. Leonard Berkowitz of the University of Wisconsin and Dr. Albert Bandura of Stanford

University's Department of Psychology, believe that the evidence outweighs any objections. Says Bandura, "Television serves as a powerful tutor. The evidence suggests that many children are more likely to behave aggressively when they have been exposed to TV aggression than when they have not. And, we are not talking about strange kids. These studies have been conducted on normal children."

Studies have shown three possible effects of viewing television violence. Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, they may be more fearful of the world around them, and they may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.

First, children with a history of heavy TV viewing are less aroused by violent scenes than light viewers are. In several studies, watching a violent instead of a nonviolent program made youngsters far slower to step in or call for help when they saw younger children fighting or playing destructively.

Second, studies by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and New York's Foundation for Child Development have shown that children who watch a lot of television are more likely to feel that the world is a mean and dangerous place.

Additionally, children's behavior has been seen to change after watching violent programs. In a Pennsylvania State University study, children in a preschool were observed both before and after watching either aggressive cartoons or nonviolent programs for four weeks.

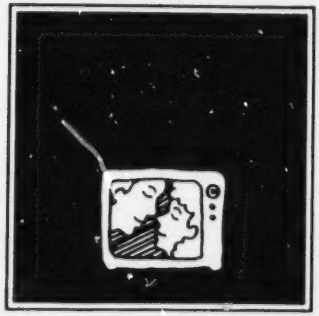
"We didn't see much exact copying of what they saw in the 'Batman' or 'Superman' cartoons," says Dr. Aletha Huston-Stein, now at the University of Kansas. "But the children who watched the violent shows were more likely to hit out at their playmates, argue, disobey class rules, leave tasks unfinished, and were less willing to wait for things than those who watched the nonviolent programs."

Two other compelling studies, one in New York and the other in England, showed the long-range effects of televised violence. Both found that children who were higher in their viewing of violence during elementary school years were also higher in their level of aggressive behavior as teenagers almost ten years later.

While scientists are convinced that children can learn aggressive behavior from television, they also point out that parents have tremendous power to moderate that influence.

For example, even if children recalled important scenes in a violent program, they often failed to connect the aggressive act to its motive or consequences in a study by Dr. Andrew Collins of the University of Minnesota. It wasn't until they were 10 to 13 years old that youngsters understood the full context of a program. But watching the program with an adult improved the younger children's understanding and made them more likely to form a negative opinion of violent characters.

Dr. Bradley Greenberg of Michigan State University found similar results. "In homes where parents watched television with their children, they almost wiped out the effects of viewing antisocial behavior," he says.



ife on the Screen:
How real is it?

In its early years, the television world was almost exclusively white, middle- or upper-class, and male. Recently, the professional woman, the minority family, the single parent, and the blue-collar worker have begun to appear on the screen more often. "Today's programming shows a diversity not typical of TV a few years ago," says Dr. Joyce Sprafkin of the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

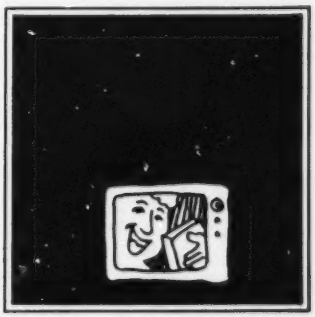
The overall picture that TV presents, however, is still far different from the real world, and this may have consequences for your child. The televised world, according to the University of Pennsylvania's Dr. George Gerbner is one in which "crime occurs ten times more often than it does on the streets, where men outnumber women three to one, where young people are only one-third and the elderly one-fifth of their actual proportion of the population, where women rarely work outside the home and most are younger than the men they deal with, and where children often fail at the things they attempt to do."

A number of studies show that if viewers do not have direct experience with what they see on TV, they tend to believe whatever is portrayed. As a result, heavy-viewing children are more likely to think that stereotypes of ethnic groups and people who hold certain jobs are true. They also believe the world is more violent than it actually is.

Distinguishing between reality and fantasy may also be troublesome. Not only may young viewers mistake fictitious characters and events for real ones, but their lack of understanding about TV production techniques — the use of stunt people, camera zooms, flashback or dream sequences — may cause confusion. However, Dr. Aimee Dorr while at Harvard University found that children as young as kindergarten age could be taught the difference between reality and fantasy on television if they were told what was "real" and what was "pretend" and how TV producers made something make-believe look real.

Finally, television may bring topics such as drug abuse, alcoholism, or sex to your child's attention sooner than you expect. For example, a study by Sprafkin showed the number of sexual innuendoes on situation comedies, often watched by children, increased from one per hour of prime-time TV in 1975 to 11 in 1978. Sixty percent of the parents she surveyed thought there were too many references to sex on TV.

Her study again, however, illustrated the important influence of parents. Although parents believed television was a major source of sexual information for their children, the children themselves rated parents and friends ahead of TV when asked where they learned about sex.



ommercials and Kids:

Does advertising influence children?

A National Science Foundation report estimates that the average child is exposed to about 20,000 television commercials each year. How effective are these TV ads?

Drs. Joan Galst and Mary White of Columbia University followed preschool children and their mothers on a supermarket shopping trip. The youngsters they observed had strong preferences for certain brands of cereals or candy that were related to advertising they had seen on television.

Many studies suggest that children under six or even eight years of age do not understand that the purpose of advertising is to sell a product. When children do grasp the persuasive intent of ads, they believe them less. As children get older, for example, the number of their requests based on TV commercials they have seen drops. However, Dr. Thomas Robertson at the University of Pennsylvania discovered that exposure to a steady stream of pre-Christmas television toy ads converted even initially skeptical 8- to 12-year-olds.

Because they believe that young viewers are deceived by toy advertising and that ads for sugared food products encourage poor eating habits by children, some consumer groups such as Action for Children's Television argue that all advertising should be banned from children's programming. This has been done in Canada where the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation prohibits advertising on programs aimed at children under 13.

In response, advertisers and broadcasters point out that many American television stations already subscribe to an industry code that requires products, such as toys, to be shown in accurate scale and prohibits hosts of children's programs from selling products. A recent move by the Federal Trade Commission to impose more stringent regulations or even to ban children's advertising was halted by Congress. However, even if such attempts succeed in the future, many young children watch prime-time programming where advertising messages will inevitably reach them.

etween TV and the Child:

What can parents do?

Research studies make it clear that although television can affect children's attitudes and behavior, parents are far from helpless in the exchange between the TV set and their child. Syracuse University's Dr. George Comstock puts it this way, "Television influences when other influences are weak or absent."

Remember that television is only one of many factors having an impact on your child's life. The family, school, church, friends, and other adults all play roles in determining the values and behavior of your child. Used with careful thought and action, television can be a positive force in your home.

Although social science has verified that your intervention can change the effect of television on a child, little research has been conducted to discover which methods of regulating TV are *most* effective. The suggestions here have been tried by families, recommended by experts, or seem to follow logically from the research, but you may want to experiment to find those that are most useful for your family.

Time

If you are concerned that television may be occupying too much of your child's time, consider these questions: Is the television set constantly on when your child is at home? Is your youngster unable to generate any entertainment or play activity on his or her own? Even if friends are available for play, does your child choose TV? Does conversation center exclusively on television programs and characters? If the answer to several of these questions is yes, then you might consider setting some limits on your child's viewing.

One drastic way to do this — living without television — has been tried by some families. Many of them report that the first few weeks are difficult; everyone struggles to find activities to replace TV, and the children often complain that they've "got nothing to do." However, if they make it past this initial period, some families find they enjoy the newfound time for reading, family conversation, games, and hobbies.

Getting rid of the set is going to be a solution for only a few families. Another option is to settle on a weekly limit of viewing hours for your child. But how many?

The experts seem to agree that younger children should watch less than older children. Harvard Professor of Pediatrics Dr. Berry Brazelton feels that preschoolers should be restricted to "an hour at most, preferably a half hour at a time, and the parent should try to participate with the child." Dorothy and Jerome Singer suggest that preschoolers be limited to one hour per day and that elementary school children watch no more than two hours daily. These guidelines may be difficult to follow, however, if older brothers and sisters, or you, are watching more. You will have to determine what fits your own family circumstances best.

If you decide to change the family rules concerning television, discuss them with your child. You and the child can jointly keep a time chart of his or her activities, including television watching, homework, and play with friends. Then you can talk about what might be eliminated and what to put in its place. Let your child contribute to the decision to reduce viewing time.

If you set a weekly limit, you can have the child use the television schedules published in newspapers and magazines to select programs to be watched in the coming week. He or she can choose shows to meet a time limit, or you can assign points to programs and give the child a point total to spend each week. Programs that you don't want your child to watch should "cost" more in points or can be crossed off the schedule.

Another way to limit viewing is to rule out television at certain times — before breakfast, after school, on weeknights. Some families simply unplug the set and move it to a closet, attic, or basement from Sunday night until the following Friday night.

If you want to encourage your child to participate in a wider variety of activities, you and the child can make a list of alternative things to do — taking a bicycle ride, reading a book, going for a walk or run, working on a hobby, playing a game with a brother, sister, or friend. Then, before being allowed to watch television, your child must choose and do something from the list.

Finally, you can encourage the entire family to avoid random viewing — turning on the set to "see what's on." You and your children should have program choices in mind before sitting down to watch TV. Then, when the program you planned to watch is over, see that the set is turned off immediately.

Violence

Because of the pervasiveness of violence in both adult and children's programming, just limiting the number of hours your child watches TV will probably reduce the amount of aggression he or she views. If you decide to use a point system to regulate viewing, assign the highest numbers to the most violent programs. Your child must then spend more points to watch a violent show and will end up watching less TV (and less violence) overall.

Try to watch at least one episode of the programs your child views so that you have firsthand knowledge of their violent content. Rankings of the most and least violent shows are also published by organizations such as the National PTA's TV Action Center.

When violence appears during programs, you can discuss with your child what motivated the character to commit the violent act, whether someone in real life might have responded differently, how else the character could have behaved, and what the painful consequences of violence are. With young children you may also have to point out that violence on entertainment programs is "faked" and explain some of the ways that can be done.

If you want to put an outright ban on some violent programs, discuss the reasons why you object to them with your child. Explain why it is important for all members of the family to be selective in their television viewing.

You can also encourage your child to watch programs with characters and situations that demonstrate helping, cooperation, and caring because these programs have been shown to influence children's behavior in a positive way.

Life on the Screen

It is sometimes easy to forget that you do not view TV through the same eyes as a child. Children may still lack the experience and skills to understand some of what they see on television. Therefore, whenever possible, you should watch television with your child and talk about program content. You may have to supply the connections between scenes, give the meanings of difficult words, put events into an historical context, explain scientific facts, point out the differences between reality and fantasy, or fit disturbing portrayals into an overall picture of life for your child.

Ask children to compare what they see on the screen with people, places, and events they know firsthand, have read about, or studied in school. For example, are the police officers, teachers, black families, old people, or motorcycle riders they know similar to or different from TV characters? You may have to remind your child that a televised character or situation is just *one* and not the only example of what might be true in real life.

You can help your children broaden their own experiences with people and with other sources of information so they form opinions and make judgments based on an ever-widening range of knowledge. Encourage them to read newspapers, listen to the radio, talk to adults about their work, or meet people from different ethnic or social backgrounds.

Children can also begin learning critical viewing skills — how to distinguish good acting, dialogue, and interesting plots from the bad. Help them evaluate programs by thinking about more than the action on the screen or the story line: How believable are the characters in what they say and do? Can you tell if the show was filmed on a set or on location? How could the director have produced the program's special effects? Does a particular series always resolve problems by the close of the program or does it use cliffhanger endings? What kind of program — documentary, situation comedy, drama, variety show, news report — are you watching and how might its format influence its content and style?

If you or your child wants more assistance in learning how to view TV critically, materials and courses have been developed for parents, children, and the whole family. Some programs may be offered periodically at your local school or library. Some of the organizations which develop and produce these programs are listed at the end of this booklet.

Advertising

You can try to counteract the appeal of toy and food commercials in several ways. First, you may have to translate advertising disclaimers into language young children understand. Explain that "partial assembly required" means they have to put the toy together before they can play with it. A cereal commercial that states the product is "part of a balanced breakfast" may open the way for a brief explanation of vitamin or diet requirements.

On shopping trips it might be worthwhile to investigate with children the toys that look big, fast, and exciting on the screen, but that tend to lose some of their appeal when seen close up. In some families, one purchase of a highly advertised toy that soon bored the child was more effective than any parental discussion.

You may want to give your child information about nutrition, and then encourage him or her to use it when helping you shop for food. For example, if the child has learned to read package labels, you can let the youngster choose the breakfast cereal from among those where sugar is not the first ingredient listed.

You can use games to teach children about advertising. Exaggerate the subtle appeals contained in ads until they appear humorous. Have your children make up their own versions of commercials, and then question them about their claims.

Children may also enjoy keeping track of all the food products advertised on a Saturday morning or weekday afternoon. Have them classify the foods by type. This may dramatize to them the heavy advertising emphasis on prepared and sugared foods.

Other Action

In addition to controlling the TV set in your home, you may wish to join others in trying to have some impact on the television industry. You can call or write local stations, the networks, or government regulatory

agencies to complain about or praise programs. You might also consider joining a citizen action group that is working to improve children's programming. These groups are involved in activities that range from publishing pamphlets and magazines, organizing classes and discussion groups, and monitoring programs, to advocating controversial tactics, such as boycotts of products advertised on programs the group finds objectionable.

You may wish to contact several different organizations to find one that best represents your interests. To help you get started, the next few pages contain the names and addresses of industry and consumer groups.

Letters about programming or advertising can be sent to the networks, government agencies, and the broadcasting industry's trade organization.

ABC
1330 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10019

CBS
51 West 52nd Street
New York, NY 10019

NBC
30 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, NY 10020

PBS
485 L'Enfant Plaza West
Washington, D.C. 20024

Federal Communications Commission
1919 "M" Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

Federal Trade Commission
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Pennsylvania Avenue and Sixth Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20580

National Association of Broadcasters
1771 "N" Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Television Information Office
745 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Information about memberships, activities, publications, or educational material can be obtained from the following non-profit consumer groups and educational organizations. Each of these national groups has its own philosophy and priorities for action. You may, therefore, feel more comfortable with one organization than another, or may find a local group that meets your interests.

Action for Children's Television
46 Austin Street
Newtonville, MA 02160

American Council for Better Broadcasts
120 East Wilson Street
Madison, WI 53703

Coalition for Better Television
P.O. Box 1398
Tupelo, MS 39209

Council on Children, Media and Merchandising
1346 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

National Black Media Coalition
516 "U" Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

National Citizens' Committee for Broadcasting
1530 "P" Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

National Coalition on Television Violence
P.O. Box 647
Decatur, IL 62521

National Council for Children and Television
20 Nassau Street
Suite 215
Princeton, NJ 08540

The National PTA TV Action Center
700 North Rush Street
Chicago, IL 60611

People for the American Way
1901 Avenue of the Stars
Suite 666
Los Angeles, CA 90067

Four regional centers have developed Critical Television Viewing Skills material for parents, students, and teachers. The centers produce resources for use by different age groups.

(Elementary School)
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, TX 78701

(Middle Grades)
WNET/Thirteen
356 West 58th Street
New York, NY 10019

(High School)
Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development
1855 Folsom Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

(Post-Secondary)
Boston University School of Public Communications
640 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215

Two other organizations offer materials or courses for parents on how to use television effectively.

Media Action Research Center
475 Riverside Drive
Suite 1370
New York, NY 10027

Parent Participation TV Workshop
699 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10021

The following groups provide resources for teachers who want to use television in the school.

Agency for Instructional Television
Box A
Bloomington, IN 47402

On Television Limited
388 Broadway
New York, NY 10013

Prime Time School Television
120 South LaSalle Street
Chicago, IL 60603

Teachers' Guides to Television
699 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10021

For those who wish to read more about the history of the television industry or research described in this booklet, the following books may be helpful.

Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Comstock, George. *Television in America*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980.

Murray, John. *Television & Youth: 25 Years of Research & Controversy*. Boys Town, NE: The Boys Town Center, 1980.

National Institute of Mental Health. *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties*. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 1982.

Palmer, Edward and Aimee Dorr. *Children and the Faces of Television: Teaching, Violence, and Selling*. New York: Academic Press, 1980.

The following publications, some more critical than others of television and its effect on children, offer suggestions for parents.

Kaye, Evelyn. *The ACT Guide to Children's Television*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

Logan, Ben and Kate Moody, eds. *Television Awareness Training: The Viewer's Guide for Family and Community*. New York: Media Action Research Center, 1979.

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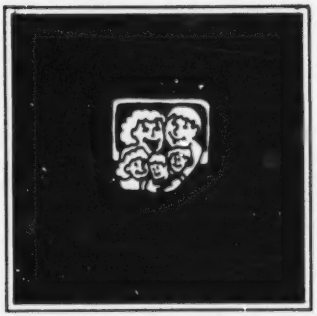

fterword:

Why should parents get involved?

This booklet has provided you with a wealth of information about the possible effects — harmful and beneficial — of television on children. It has also offered you a number of suggestions about how to increase your influence over your children's television viewing experiences. You can set up family viewing schedules, write letters to your local broadcasters or cable television operator, join a TV action group . . . But why should you?

There are many answers to that question, but to me, as a parent and as founder of Action for Children's Television (ACT), three answers seem of special importance. First, you should get involved with trying to improve your children's experience with television because, at its best, television can expose young audiences to the enormous diversity of people, places, ideas, feelings, and opportunities that will influence their lives. That does not mean that children should watch too much television or should be exposed to adult television programs they are not old enough to understand. What it does mean is that children and adolescents deserve a much greater choice of programs designed just for them. That is why ACT works to promote the greatest possible diversity of educational, informational, and entertainment programming for young audiences, designed for specific age groups of children and adolescents and shown without commercials.

Second, you should let producers and programmers of television know what you want TV to provide for your children because, if you don't, the system will not respond to your needs. Broadcasters are obligated by law to operate "in the public interest." But if you and I, as members of the public, don't inform the TV powers-that-be of our expectations of and disappointments with the medium, how are they going to meet the public interest standard? For years most broadcasters have failed to serve children's special needs. But how can we expect broadcasters to live up to their obligations to young audiences if we do not define what those obligations are?

Third, it is more important today than ever before to be aware of children's relationship with television, because of the advent of the new video technologies. Cable television, for example, is having a major impact on family viewing patterns. Cable companies are under a contractual obligation to provide each municipality they serve with special services. Because of its numerous channels, cable TV has an enormous potential to offer young audiences a wide variety of noncommercial programming. At its best, cable can supply children with channels full of programs designed especially for them and with the opportunity to design and produce their own programs. But it won't — unless service to children is specified in the cable company's franchising agreement with the city. So it is up to parents and concerned citizens to get involved in their local franchise negotiations.

No matter what you do, you aren't going to make TV perfect, and you certainly aren't going to be able to maintain perfect control over the family TV set. But by working to improve your children's experience with television, you will be rid of the sense of helplessness and passivity that TV so easily engenders. And that is no small success.

Peggy Charren
President
Action for Children's Television

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